

# Unravelling a mystery at Saunderton's workhouse

Jackie Kay



caretaker's bungalow

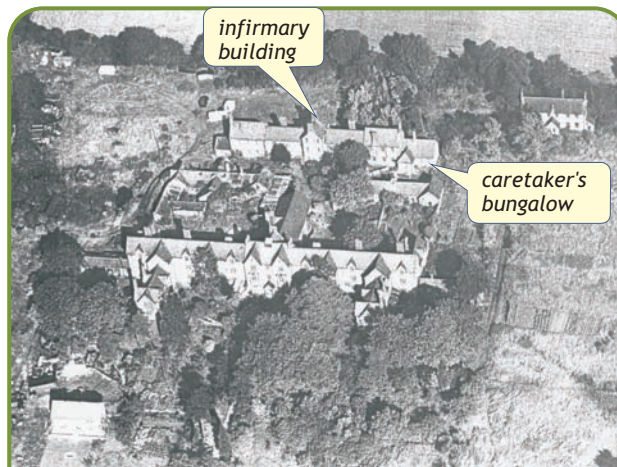
The whitewashed caretaker's bungalow can be seen clearly in the grounds of the Clare Charity Centre.  
The original workhouse would have been just to the left of the current building. Copyright: Whispercam

In the grounds of the Clare Charity Centre in Saunderton, there is a small white-washed building, reputed to be all that remains of the Wycombe Union Workhouse which once stood on the site. It is currently used as office space for a charity and has been completely gutted inside for its modern use. Despite the whitewash, the traditional brick and flint construction of its rear (north-east-facing) wall is still evident. In the mid-1950s, it served as a caretaker's bungalow for Ortho Pharmaceuticals Ltd, part of the Johnson and Johnson group, for whom the main building on the site with its imposing pseudo Art Deco features surrounding a large manufacturing area, had just been built.

The Wycombe Union Workhouse it replaced had been an equally imposing huge gothic-style building mostly comprising 3-4 storeys including attics in the gables. Designed by George Gilbert Scott, it had separate wings for male and female inmates, and an infirmary block at the back. Architect's drawings, and later photographs and maps, show the layout clearly. It served as a workhouse from 1841 until the middle of the First World War when it was completely taken over for military purposes. Thereafter it had a rather chequered history, parts being used for some time as flats and later as a Youth Hostel. It appears to have been demolished in stages.

So exactly which part of the old workhouse was our caretaker's bungalow of the nineteen fifties which still survives to the current day? It ought to be an easy question to answer, but it

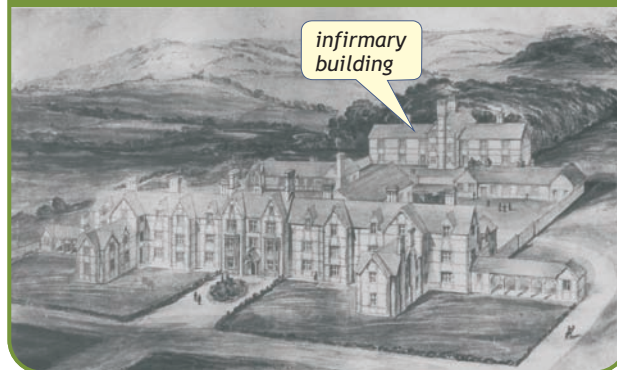
isn't. Overlaying maps of different vintages it becomes clear that the bungalow lies adjacent to but outside the original footprint of the workhouse, with one (north-west facing) wall incorporating the chimney coinciding with the south eastern end of the infirmary building. Or, put another way, it was a single-storey extension to the infirmary at some point, probably not until after the workhouse ceased operation. An aerial photograph taken shortly before demolition confirms that such an extension was made, but doesn't answer the questions of when or why.



infirmary building

caretaker's bungalow

This 1950s photograph shows that the caretaker's bungalow was part of a later extension to the original infirmary building, as shown in the c1841 architect's drawing. (Both photographs supplied by [www.workhouses.org.uk](http://www.workhouses.org.uk))



infirmary building

It seems odd that only the rear wall was constructed to match the adjoining workhouse. No such effort was made for the front wall. Was this expedient action during World War I? Or even later? Do any readers know? If so, please contact Jackie Kay at [jackiehkay@aol.com](mailto:jackiehkay@aol.com) or 01494 534876.